

## Abraham Lincoln papers

From Ambrose Thompson to Abraham Lincoln<sup>1</sup>, April 25, 1862

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1 Thompson, a captain and assistant quartermaster in the U. S. Army, was the son of Ambrose W. Thompson, the head of the Chiriqui Improvement Company.

Head Quarters Shields division

April 25. 1862

Sir

In view of the present emancipation of slaves either by their own action in leaving their masters; or the effects of laws recently passed, it becomes equally a duty of Christian Charity, and a political necessity to provide promptly & efficaciously for those thus helpless and homeless to the last degree — who are besides a severe tax upon the nation and are even at this early period becoming, from improvident and reckless habits an intolerable nuisance

I have perhaps more than others, from my position and active life had the opportunity of studying this question, and this is my excuse for thus addressing you

There have been several plans proposed for colonizing these people, among others, that of sending them to Liberia or to Hayti; both of these are strongly objectionable In Liberia, they would soon be swallowed up in the great mass of Africans, — they would revert to their primitive condition — remote from us they could return no recompense for the outlay to which the nation would be subjected. English traders would reap every advantage which could be gained & add nothing to the improvement of the settlement

Hayti has been settled, all the land which is worth possessing is already occupied; that which speculators would force upon new-comers is so notoriously unhealthy that a thought should not be bestowed upon it — the recent mortality which attended the Spanish Squadron is sufficient to cause it to be shunned.

There is one other place, and it is this of this, I wish to speak. It is not the unhealthy isthmus of Darien — but an entirely unknown country — one which I have crossed, and re-crossed in every direction. One which is now inhabited but by a few indians, but which abounds in everything which would conduce to the comfort of the negro and aid his elevation to the dignity of separate political existence — a country, the topography of which comprises every altitude from the sea to that of

12.000 feet above it, with every attendant climate and vegetation, — abundant supplies of water, — the splendid pasturage of the plains of Texas in one place, and a cool and pleasant temperature, whilst in another is found the rich soil & humid climate of Louisiana — a country in which the negro could himself work out, with every advantage on his side, the social problem of his race.

I allude to the province of Chiriqui in South America, — its general topography I can sum up in a few words. On the Atlantic side it has a most magnificent harbor, perfectly safe, dotted with numerous islands, a harbor in which the navies of the world could ride, and it could easily be fortified.— From its shores the land rises gradually for half a mile, when spurs of the Andes, in a succession of conical peaks from 900 to 1200 feet high are met, with valleys and small plains between them, all thickly overgrown with tropical vegetation, the valleys of the larger streams, those of the Robalo, Colebra, Chanquena, Chacca Mula &c are very beautiful; farther on, the country become exceedingly rough and mountainous, very picturesque & covered with dense forests until the “divide” is reached, a distance of about twenty miles; here the forests disappear and beautiful groves like those of an English park take their place for about ten miles, when the groves disappear & at an elevation of about 4000 feet a glorious view is presented of a rolling country, dotted here and there with small groves — finely watered, abounding in cattle, sloping gradually to the Pacific 40 miles, where there is another harbor not so large, but in other respects not inferior to that on the Atlantic; it is by far the best harbor on the Pacific, and so stated to be by L'Amiral Peliou of the French Navy, who made a rough survey of it some years ago.

The mineral productions are immense — there are also inexhaustible coal beds of fine quality on the Atlantic from the outcrop of which, cut out by a machette I have many a time cooked my breakfast, and in crossing small rivulets, I have found pebbles richly seamed with gold

The vegetable productions are necessarily from the climate differences of the most varied kind. Even on the table lands at an elevation of 3500 feet and its consequent low temperature, I have found sugar cane, spanish rice, Cedar, Oak, Coffee tree cocoa nut, yam, cabbage, ockra, cotton tree, blackberries, oranges, and limes growing side by side with other & more indiginous vegetation

Turtles and fish abound in the harbors, and game of almost every kind in the forest and on the slopes of the cordilleras.

In this country then, there is room for every branch of industry, and there is all the variation of food and temperature necessary for health; it is really the Switzerland of tropical America, and its colonization by the United States will not only solve the difficulty with the slaves, but will give to our nation an undisputed control over a great isthmus route, a preponderating influence in Central and

South America, a splendid naval station, and would add another link to the chain binding in enduring friendship the eastern states with those of the golden Pacific

The cost of the proposed colonization would be small compared with that of Liberia, — or even with what it now costs monthly to maintain the “contrabands” The benefits to be derived from the settlement are incalculable, regarded either in a commercial or political point of view — and in the cause of humanity, I have to state that the destitution and suffering daily brought before my eyes view amongst the negroes is appalling — the men, I can, as an officer of the Quarter Master's department give some employment to, but the women and children, I possess no authority to aid.

There is nothing required for the immediate colonization, or rather its commencement, that the Quarter Master's, and Commissary's departments could not at this time, furnish in a week. Vessels are lying idle at the wharves which could be chartered or purchased at low rates, and rapidly fitted out with the necessary bunks — three months provision of pork, rice, sugar, coffee & hard bread could be sent out, and the whole expense, if properly managed would be less than it now costs to employ contrabands. Let it only be understood that this passage, and the provisions are not donations, but to be paid for by labor, and in a short time under a firm discipline, the country will be opened, lands tilled, roads made, and revenues derived from mines and sawmills — a new republic the settlement would soon be self supporting — a new republic will have been commenced, a new race be springing into existence and a great boon to the world have been gained

I have the honor to be

Very respectfully

Your Obedient Servt

(signed) Ambrose Thompson

(copy)

Winchester Virga. Apl 25./62

My dear Father

I have written a letter (enclosed) to the President of the United States, on the subject of the colonization of the “Contrabands” I have felt it a duty to give all the information in my power to the Government without entering into details which would have made the communication too long.

Will you, if you think it proper, please to have this letter sent to him. I wrote it last night after twelve o'clock, and you know I had been up all of the three previous nights, still on reading it over I do not see anything that I can add to it. With this I send you also a list of articles which would be required for transplanting to the South, one thousand of these destitute negroes, and laying thus the germ of the colony. With these articles I should consider the expedition well supplied. Seeds of various kinds could be procured from the patent office, & would be returned ten fold when the country is settled.

The items of greatest cost — would tents — would revert to the government. I consider them temporarily necessary for working parties — and for any contagious diseases at the commencement— There would be various incidental expences — for medical supplies — tin cups — spoons, knives & forks — straw hats — soap - the purchase of canoes at the lagoon, and of lumber and nails for building purposes. The hire of a few Indians &c which would probably swell the total amount to about \$40.000 exclusive of the charter of vessels.

I hope this hasty memorandum may be of some service to this great cause I have written it in the few minutes I have been able to snatch during the day I am very tired & cannot add more

Truly yours

(signed) Ambrose Thompson

Cost of rations 90 days for 1000 men

Bread — — \$3600

Coffee 1980

Sugar 1350

Pork 4293 \$11.233.—

1500 pairs booties @ \$1.94 \$2190.

1500 "" flannel shirts 88. 1320

1500 trousers 3.03 4545.

1500 blankets 2.95 4425.

1500 axes 78. 1170

1500 hatchets 30. 450

1000 spades 56. 560

1000 Pickaxes 70. 700

800 Camp Kettles 48. 384

1000 messpans 17 170

200 Iron pots 1.14 228

10 Hospital tents \$111.70 1,117

50 Sibley tents 4861 2430.50 \$20.399.50

\$31.632.50

It will be noticed that a surplus of some articles is required to be kept in store and used when necessary.